

## **fear and architecture**



The intersection of psychological affect and the built environment finds its most potent expression in the management of fear, a sentiment that has functioned as a primary determinant in the formation of urban space since antiquity. In the modern era, the relationship between fear and architecture has evolved from the overt, monumental displays of power intended to elicit collective submission to the subtle, fragmented mechanisms of defensive urbanism designed to exclude specific populations. This analysis investigates the trajectory of architectural fear, centering on the career of Albert Speer during the National Socialist period in Germany and examining how his legacy of "design as regulation" continues to inform contemporary city planning in Berlin and beyond. The central thesis posits that while Speer utilized architecture to integrate the masses into a submissive but unified identity through "monumental fear," contemporary city planning utilizes architecture to disintegrate the "undesirable" individual from the urban fabric through "exclusionary fear." This transition reflects a fundamental shift

from the state's desire to recruit the body into a totalizing ideology to its current impulse to filter out bodies that do not conform to the dictates of global capital and security.

Historically, defensive structures such as castles, moats, and walls have been used to define private space and exclude external dangers, simultaneously signifying power and privilege. However, the th century introduced a more sophisticated psychological application of fear, where the environment was designed not just to keep an enemy out, but to keep the citizen in a state of psychological management.

Albert Speer, as the chief architect of the Third Reich, mastered this "scenography of power". His work was predicated on the belief that architecture should evoke intense emotion and serve a purpose beyond mere aesthetics—it had to communicate strength, permanence, and the absolute authority of the regime. By manipulating scale, lighting, and materials, Speer created spaces that induced a sense of insignificance in the individual, fostering a psychological state of awe and submission that was essential for the maintenance of a totalitarian state.

The architectural career of Albert Speer was intrinsically linked to the ideological demands of National Socialism. His rise to power was facilitated by a personal connection to Adolf Hitler, who saw in Speer the architect capable of giving physical form to his megalomaniacal visions. Together, they conceived of architecture as a tool for "the aestheticisation of politics," a concept decried by Walter Benjamin as a primary mechanism of fascist control. Speer's neoclassical style was characterized by a deliberate distortion of classical forms to emphasize mass and eternity. In projects such as the New Reich Chancellery, Speer utilized "distorted neoclassicism" to ensure the building functioned as an eternal memorial. The structure featured an enormous, simple, and regularly ordered facade stressed by vertical lines, with smooth surfaces and minimal ornamentation. This simplicity was not a nod to modernism but a calculated move to ensure the building's impact was purely one of scale and authority.

The interior of the Chancellery was designed to lead guests through a series of increasingly opulent and intimidating halls. Hitler himself remarked that his buildings were intended to give the world a "taste of the power and grandeur of the German Reich" and to make every visitor feel as if they were "visiting the master of the world". The psychological effect of this space was to make the individual feel like a guest in a realm that transcended human time, effectively subduing them into a compliant "mass". Speer's mastery of fear was not limited to stone. At the Nuremberg rally grounds, he created the "Cathedral of Light" (Lichtdom) using 130 anti-aircraft searchlights pointed toward the sky. This ephemeral architecture of light created a sense of "tranquility" and awe among the 150,000 Party faithful, eliciting an "ecstatic adoration". By using searchlights— instruments of war—to create a religious atmosphere, Speer successfully merged military might with spiritual devotion, inducing a fear that was simultaneously protective and intimidating.

One of the most distinctive and chilling aspects of Speer's architectural philosophy was the Ruinenwerttheorie, or the Theory of Ruin Value. This theory argued that the monuments of the Third Reich should be designed such that, even after thousands of years of neglect, their ruins would retain their aesthetic value and continue to symbolize the greatness of the regime, much like the ruins of Ancient Rome and Greece.

Speer claimed to have invented this idea after seeing the "dreary" rust and iron debris of a modern building under reconstruction. To avoid such an "unaesthetic" end, he insisted that the most significant buildings of the Reich avoid "anonymous" materials like steel girders and ferroconcrete, which Hitler and Speer believed would not produce noble ruins. Instead, they mandated the use of natural stone and specific principles of statics to ensure the buildings decayed into "romantic" ruins. This philosophy represented a "materialistic control of time". By designing for the ruin, Speer sought to make the future "calculable and controllable," ensuring that the Third Reich's ideological totality would

remain even after its physical collapse. This was an attempt to disguise political motives under the "disinterested" sign of nature, turning architecture into a vehicle for a "mythological history".

The Ruinenwerttheorie stands in stark contrast to the concept of the ruin developed by the philosopher Walter Benjamin during the same period. While Speer used the ruin to reinforce a "mythological history" and ideological totality, Benjamin viewed the ruin as an "emblem of the melancholic worldview" and a critical tool for demythifying symbolism.

Benjamin argued that ruins should be read as processes that strip away symbolism to reveal historical truth through reduction. For Speer, the ruin was a "symbol" of an idealized, atemporal totality; for Benjamin, it was an "allegory" of history's catastrophes and the transience of human effort. This tension highlights the ethical culpability of Speer's work, which is often excluded from the architectural canon because its "problematic political program remains somehow inherent in its material". The ultimate expression of Nazi architectural fear was the plan for "Welthauptstadt Germania"—the transformation of Berlin into the world capital of a "Greater Germanic Reich". This project was not merely about urban renewal; it was a totalizing psychogeographic reconstruction designed to reflect the regime's "ideological superiority".

The plan was centered on a -kilometer-long North-South Axis, a "parade ground" that would be closed to traffic and crown the city with monumental structures. At its center was the Volkshalle (People's Hall), a domed building designed by Hitler himself. Had it been built, the Volkshalle would still be the largest enclosed space in the world, capable of housing 180,000 people—a scale so vast that it was feared the humidity from the breath of the participants would create its own weather system inside the dome.

The construction of Germania was intimately connected to the machinery of the Holocaust. The demand for labor and materials led to the placement of concentration

camps near quarries—including Mauthausen, Buchenwald, and Gross-Rosen—where tens of thousands died quarrying stone for Speer's designs. In Berlin itself, the implementation of Speer's plan required the razing of between 50,000 and 100,000 houses.

This "urban renewal" involved the forced rehousing of ordinary Berliners, but its most brutal impact was on the city's Jewish population. From 1938, police were ordered to round up "misfits"—including beggars, tramps, and homosexuals—for labor on the project. Jewish families were driven from their homes to provide space for "Aryan" citizens displaced by construction, initiating a process that led directly to their deportation and extermination. Germania was thus not just an aesthetic of fear, but a literal structure of terror that facilitated genocide.

After 1945, Berlin became a landscape of "chilling, mundane, and graceful" remnants of Speer's vision. The city's subsequent history was defined by its attempts to "exorcise the ghosts" of its past through both the physical removal of Nazi architecture and the imposition of new ideological barriers, such as the Berlin Wall. One of the most significant surviving remnants is the Schwerbelastungskörper (heavy load bearing body), a massive concrete cylinder. Built in 1941 to test whether Berlin's marshy soil could support the Triumphal Arch, the structure sank substantially, proving that the ground itself was resistant to the regime's megalomania. Too heavy to demolish without destroying the surrounding neighborhood, it remains as a "monstrous" symbol of the regime's failed aspirations. In the late th century, Berlin adopted a philosophy of "Critical Reconstruction" as a restorative and corrective measure. Introduced by architects like Josef Paul Kleihues, this movement sought to "mend the holes" in the city fabric created by Speer's demolition, Allied bombing, and functionalist post-war planning. Critical Reconstruction specifically opposed Speer's scale by enforcing a "traditional European urban grain," reestablishing historic street patterns, and limiting building heights to

roughly feet. It aimed to create an urbanism of "typological harmony" that would provide a backdrop for social stability and avoid the nationalist echoes of Germany's past. This movement was a "politically charged search for national identity," attempting to use architecture to heal the trauma of a divided and scarred city.

As Berlin moved past the monumental fear of the th century, a new, more fragmented form of architectural fear has emerged: defensive or "hostile" architecture. While Speer's architecture sought to unify the masses through awe, modern defensive architecture seeks to exclude "undesirable" individuals through a "vernacular of terror". Defensive architecture is an intentional design strategy that uses elements of the built environment to guide or restrict behavior. Artist Nils Norman, who has documented these practices since the late 1990s, categorizes them into groups such as "bum free," "anti-graffiti," and "anti-skate". These designs are explicitly intended to prevent "undesirable" members of the public—the homeless, vagrants, and loitering teenagers—from using public space for long periods.

Contemporary Berlin provides several stark examples of how "security-driven urban design" and "affective control" disenfranchise specific groups. Areas like Alexanderplatz, Breitscheidplatz, and Görlitzer Park have become battlegrounds for the negotiation of security, order, and social inclusion. At Alexanderplatz, security is often negotiated in the context of homelessness and crime. The square, which sees over 360,000 visitors daily, is governed by a "threatened spaces" narrative. This narrative argues that the presence of marginalized groups leads to "social neglect," causing other citizens (particularly women) to feel unsafe and leading to a downward spiral of declining order. To combat this, the city utilizes "temporary security architecture," such as mobile police buildings, and has modified street furniture to prevent "undesirable" behavior. In the new U stations, "seamless yet hostile" benches made of steel mesh are used to conduct body heat away from anyone sitting there too long, making it physically impossible for the

homeless to sleep on the platforms. These designs do not address the root causes of poverty; they merely displace it from the public view. Following the terrorist attack in 2016, Breitscheidplatz was transformed into a "highly fortified space". The implementation of "Hostile Vehicle Mitigation" (HVM)—including concrete blocks, metal barriers, and construction fences—has spatialized anxiety and fear. For many city dwellers, these measures do not provide safety but instead create a "fearscape" that constantly displays potential threats. For racialized and marginalized communities, this fortification is paired with "discriminatory policing" and the label of kbO (kriminalitätsbelasteter Ort, or crime-ridden location). This label facilitates "affective control" and "discriminatory spatial expulsion," as security measures designed to protect the "public" are often used against those who are viewed as "enemies" or "threats".

The future of architectural fear lies in the convergence of physical space and digital technology. The "security-by-design" principle is now a fundamental part of the design and development of "smart cities". While intended to protect critical infrastructure against terrorist attacks and cyber-threats, it risks creating "surveillance states" that erode privacy and exacerbate social divisions. Modern urban centers are increasingly equipped with "AI-powered firewalls" and intrusion detection systems built into the very design of smart infrastructure. This includes the use of digital technologies for the protection of public spaces, such as live facial recognition and sensors that monitor human flow. These measures often result in "fortified enclaves" that protect the space from the public rather than for the public, making urban centers less welcoming and inclusive. The benefits of these advancements are not equitably distributed. Vulnerable groups—including those marginalized by socio-economic status, migration status, or age—often find themselves on the "periphery of these advancements". The rapid adoption of digital technologies can create "new barriers to the enjoyment of fundamental rights," as the disenfranchised are hyper-monitored but often lack the

digital literacy or access required to navigate the "secure" city.

The comparison between Albert Speer's monumentalism and contemporary defensive urbanism reveals a disturbing continuity in the use of architecture as a tool for the regulation of the human body through fear. Speer's "monumental fear" was inclusive in its totalitarianism; it sought to recruit every citizen into a collective, submissive identity through the "cathedral of light" and the "volkshalle". His architecture was designed to be a "sacrament" of the Nazi cult, a permanent "bridge of tradition" that would colonize the future through the Ruinenwerttheorie. Contemporary "exclusionary fear," however, is a tool of social filtering. It does not seek to recruit the masses but to purge the "undesirables" from the spaces of global consumption. The "vernacular of terror"—from the anti-homeless spike to the heat-conducting bench—is a fragmented, micro-level application of the same impulse that drove Speer: the desire to use the built environment to define who is "worthy" of occupying the city and who is to be relegated to the status of a "social ruin".

The history of fear and architecture demonstrates that the built environment is a powerful political tool capable of both mass mobilization and systematic disenfranchisement. Albert Speer's legacy is not merely a collection of stone ruins in Berlin and Nuremberg, but a continuing philosophy that the architect has the right and the duty to regulate the human spirit through spatial manipulation. In contemporary Berlin, the "scenography of power" has been replaced by the "vernacular of terror." The disenfranchised—the homeless, the migrant, the non-conforming—are the modern equivalents of the "misfits". To move beyond the architecture of fear, city planning must transition from a model of "security by design" that fortifies space against the public to a model of "sociality by design" that fosters inclusive, vibrant interaction. This requires a rejection of the "ruin value" and a prioritization of the lived reality of its most vulnerable residents.

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